

A forgotten voice of revolution

Kwa Chong Guan

The Straits Times, 7 August 2009

Voice Of Malayan Revolution: The CPM Radio War Against Singapore And Malaysia, 1969-1981

Edited by Wang Gungwu & Ong Weichong

Singapore: S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, 2009

Deng Xiaoping, during his historic visit to Singapore in 1978, asked then-Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew for advice as to how China might improve its relations with South-east Asia. Shut down the Voice of the Malayan Revolution (VMR), Mr Lee recalled advising Deng.

Few today would remember the radio station; even fewer would have tuned in to listen to it. But the VMR was a radio station of the Communist Party of Malaya, which broadcast propaganda to the region from a Chinese military base in Hunan. What did it broadcast to cause Mr Lee to make its closure an issue with Deng?

The answers to this and other questions are contained in this book of selected translations and summaries of VMR broadcasts from the station's beginning in 1969 to its closure in 1981. Professor Wang Gungwu and Mr Ong Weichong are to be congratulated for compiling this record and for providing an insightful essay placing the material in its historical context.

Prof Wang, chairman of the East Asia Institute, is a historian who lived through the VMR era. He writes of events that he witnessed. Mr Ong is a young associate research fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, working towards a PhD in history. We have here an unusual collaboration between historians two generations apart.

This publication is possible as Internal Security Department (ISD) officials had systematically monitored, transcribed and translated these broadcasts. Doing so was a vital part of the fight against the Communist Party of Malaya.

The old Malayan Communist Party (MCP) had fought an armed insurrection for 'independence' between 1948 and 1960, when it was defeated and withdrew to the Malaysian-Thai border. There it regrouped as the Communist Party of Malaya (CPM) and was asked by none other than Deng Xiaoping, the general secretary of the Chinese Communist Party at that time, to launch a second insurrection for 'independence'. China supported this second insurrection by, among other things, providing the CPM with the facilities to broadcast its messages.

Monitoring the broadcasts enabled the authorities to understand how the CPM was formulating its strategies for a 'revolution of the masses led by the proletariat' and to 'encircle the city from the countryside and seize political power by armed force'. Today, such language may sound strange, if not bizarre, but 25 years ago, when

Saigon fell to the North Vietnamese, the broadcasts carried a very different significance and urgency.

The authors have grouped the transcripts into five sections.

The first consists of broadcasts of party decisions and strategies. In the absence of other CPM archival material, these will form the framework of the CPM's history in this period.

The second comprises transcripts of the party's call to its faithful to sustain the revolution; and the third, messages of support for fraternal communist parties, especially the Chinese and the Thai.

There were deep splits and dissensions within the party. VMR broadcasts of the party's attempts to uphold the party line and unity form the fourth group of transcripts.

The CPM maintained that Malaya and Singapore were one country, and did not accept the separation of Singapore from Malaysia. Its interpretation of developments in Singapore and Malaysia forms the fifth part of this volume.

The ISD's decision to release its transcripts of VMR broadcasts follows its release of a compilation of Freedom News, a party publication. Releasing these archival records is to be applauded because they will provide the basis for a fuller and more nuanced understanding of our recent past.